

May 25, 2022 Monthly Briefing Transcript

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Good morning. I'm Dr. Daniel Podolsky, President of UT Southwestern Medical Center, and I want to welcome all of those joining me for this monthly update for the UT Southwestern community. As I have made these briefings over the past two years, I have begun with the most recent developments in the evolution of the pandemic, but that doesn't seem appropriate this morning. I am sure every person on the UT Southwestern campus shares the heartache of the families in Uvalde with this horrific event yesterday that left so many children dead and also a teacher. I'm sure each of you join me in sending your prayers and thoughts to all of those families, to the other students at that school, and all who are impacted by this terrible event. We still don't know all of the reasons why the gunman took these horrific actions. Presumably that will emerge in the days or weeks ahead. Whether a reflection of torment from his own demons or motivated by hate in some form, I think we could all agree that this is a tragedy in every way.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Of course, we all recognize this is by far not the first, as we have periodically seen across our country other acts of violence that have left tragedy and pain in their wake. I think of the terrible events recently in Buffalo, which we know were motivated by racist hatred. I have to say, feel even more poignant this morning as today is two years to the date since the murder of George Floyd. Reminding us that as much as I think that terrible event raised the attention on the pervasiveness and persistence of racism as a driver of so much violence in this country, there is still so much more to do. So with yesterday's events in Uvalde, I think none of us can doubt how close the world really is. And as we have the good fortune to be here at UT Southwestern, I think none of us should take for granted the people who are close to us and the good fortune we have to work in an environment of support and concern that I hope is never lost at UT Southwestern.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

So with those thoughts on this sad morning, let me turn to the Campus Update and now turn to the latest developments in the evolution of the pandemic. I did have the opportunity a little earlier this morning to see the most recent weekly update from our multidisciplinary modeling group. That will be posted to our website for you to see for yourself by the end of the day, and it really tells us that we continue to be on a steady course. That may be the good news, but that steady course also means we are seeing a slow rise in the number of cases of COVID-19 across the region and of course, in many other parts of the country. The forecast anticipates that that will continue. I would note that the RT, that value that predicts whether the pandemic and the number of cases expanding or contracting is now above 1 in both Tarrant and Dallas County. So that does mean that there are, as time is going on, more cases. And that's reflected in our campus community.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Last week, we had 99 individuals who were positive for COVID-19. That is a far cry from the several hundred that we saw at the peak of the Omicron pandemic in the January time frame, but well above what we were seeing just a couple or three weeks ago. So not that it would surprise anybody, but the UT Southwestern community is in no way isolated from the trends that are going around in our region more broadly. I would say, fortunately, there seems to be a preponderance of these new and most recent

infections that are mild in nature. At least we are seeing relatively few individuals who are sufficiently ill to seek care in the Emergency Department or require hospitalization. So for those of you who have been following the numbers, you'll know that our census at Clements University Hospital for now really several weeks on end has been in the low single digits. The same is true in terms of patients we're caring for at Parkland.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

All of which is to say the pandemic remains with us, necessitates continued vigilance in terms of being sensitive to circumstances where the risk of infection may be high, such as in large groups, and particularly when those are in relatively small indoor spaces. Notwithstanding this steady slow rise that we've seen in the recent couple of weeks and with our anticipation that that will continue, at this point we are not making any changes in our campus operations. That does mean within our health care facilities we'll continue masking. We will continue to leave that as discretionary outside of those environments. Certainly we'll continue to monitor closely as we have throughout the pandemic. And should circumstances warrant where we would need to implement other measures to reduce the risk of COVID on campus, we will certainly convey those in a timely fashion.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

So let me then turn to non-COVID-related matters, and I'm glad to say there are many more of those these days than there were in the earlier months of the pandemic. A number of really happy occasions for us as an institution; on May 12, we had the 2022 commencement exercises for our Medical School, graduating 200 new doctors who are in the process now of moving on to that next stage of their training for their eventual readiness to care for patients on an independent basis. Certainly wish all of them well. It was a moving experience, as it is each year, but I would say especially as we heard from our commencement speaker, Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson, and I would commend to all of you to listen to her commencement address, which is now online.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

She spoke of her experiences growing up in Waco, where as a black woman, she really had no opportunity to pursue a nursing degree in Texas in an integrated school, and that took her to Indiana. But she had a long career first in health care, eventually being the chief psychiatric nurse at [inaudible 00:08:23] Dallas VA. But now for more than 30 years, the congresswoman who has represented the district that includes UT Southwestern and in that role has had tremendous impact. So I really hope you will take the time to listen to her very thought-provoking and moving comments.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

And just last week on May 19, we had the graduation ceremony for our Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, and there we heard from our colleague, now retired Dr. David Russell, the inaugural Vice Provost for Basic Research, as he reflected on his long and very productive career as a scientist and

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Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

shared those insights with our newly graduated doctoral students. With that as a sort of a milestone and certainly a part of the annual cycle of life so to speak here on the campus; bringing the academic year to a close, we now look forward into the next year. Many of you have been very closely involved in the

process of developing a budget for our next fiscal year 2023. I've shared before that we anticipate that this will be challenging to us as an institution just as I know it is for each of you individually, given the forces of inflation which are evident everywhere, whether it's at the gas pump or the grocery store, or in the course of all of the things that are necessary for us to purchase for the mission of UT Southwestern.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

I've shared that we have set as a top priority goal for the budget funds sufficient to ensure across the institution, a 3% merit program funded by departments. I should add that does not mean by individuals, but overall, and we are looking to our leaders across departments to make those judgments when it comes to the specifics for any one of our colleagues here at UT Southwestern.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

In addition, there are funds set aside to address areas where adjustments need to be made because of market competitive forces, promotions, and new positions. With that as our highest priority, we still, of course, intend to be sure that the institution remains on a sound financial footing. So we need to, at the end of the day, have a margin so that we can both address any unexpected contingencies and invest in the future as we support all of our missions, from our education and training programs to our research efforts and, of course, in our clinical care. Moving beyond the budget, we are coming to what is another really, to me, a wonderful yearly event, that's needed to have been adjusted along with so much else during these pandemic years, but we returned to a more traditional approach for our Employee Recognition Week and the Quarter Century Club.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

The Employee Recognition Week will kick off officially on Monday, June 6. And there will be a variety of events and activities which have been planned by our Employee Advisory Council. You can follow the Today@UTSW for more details as those plans are shared more broadly. On Tuesday, June 7, we'll have the celebration of our Quarter Century Club. This is an opportunity to recognize those who have been members of the UT Southwestern community for 25 years or more – really a unique event on the campus. And this year we welcome 52 new members of the Quarter Century Club while also celebrating 48 colleagues who achieved 30, 35, 40, and 45 years of service as truly remarkable milestones. The members of this club epitomize UT Southwestern's commitment to our community and marks a professional accomplishment that each of those individuals should be proud of.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

I would call your attention to the upcoming June/July issue of *Center Times*, which will be an opportunity to learn more about this year's honorees. And those will be on our newsstands and also online very soon. My next briefing won't be until toward the end of June, so I want to take this opportunity to make note that June is Pride Month, and this is our LGBTQ and Allies Business Resource Group, along with the Office of Institutional Equity and Access, will help us celebrate by hosting a Pride Month celebration on June 15 from noon to 1 in the D.1502 lecture hall. It will also be livestreamed for those unable to attend. We'll be hearing from Dr. Jaime Almandoz, an Associate Professor of Internal Medicine here at UT Southwestern as the keynote speaker for that event, along with a number of other activities.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

So I would certainly encourage all UT Southwestern faculty, staff, students, residents, and visitors to attend. And again, that's on June 15 at noon. Also in June is Juneteenth, Sunday this year on June 19, as

I'm sure all of you will be aware last year, Juneteenth Day was proclaimed as an official federal holiday with the presidential proclamation, which I have here in front of me that read, "On June 19th, 1865, nearly nine decades after our nation's founding and more than two years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, enslaved Americans in Galveston, Texas, finally received word that they were free from bondage. As those who were formerly enslaved were recognized for the first time as citizens, black Americans came to commemorate Juneteenth with celebrations across the country." That's all from President Biden in declaring Juneteenth a national holiday.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

To commemorate Juneteenth this year, the Office of Institutional Equity and Access and Division of Diversity and Inclusion is inviting all UT Southwestern employees, faculty, and students to register for Keep Up the Dream Juneteenth Fest 2022, a Fair Park Juneteenth neighborhood cleanup, which will be hosted on Saturday, June 18, from 9:30 to 11:30. The event is free and registration includes a free T-shirt, free lunch, and cleaning tools. So I encourage all of you to consider participating in that event, which is hosted by the South Side Quarter Development Corporation through their MLK Clean Team Initiative. Please consider joining us and representing UT Southwestern by participating in this public service activity. And with that, I'm going to bring my comments here to a close so that there's time to hear your questions, which will be posed as they have over the past two years by Jenny Doren. Jenny?

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Well, good morning, Dr. Podolsky. I want to begin not with COVID-19 but a different infectious disease on the global radar. We're talking about monkeypox. What is it and what should we know as it relates to our campus community?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, let me start by providing a basic understanding in some historical context. Monkeypox is a rare disease, which historically has been largely confined and endemic in Central and Western Africa. The first instances of this illness date back to the late 1950s, when there were two outbreaks of these pox-like diseases in colonies of monkeys that were kept for research. And that's where the name monkeypox arises. Although the virus can be acquired from contact with monkeys and other small rodents, it is also spread person-to-person through large respiratory droplets or close physical contact. Symptoms range from fever and headache to enlarged lymph glands and shortness of breath, a rash beginning on the face and then spreading to other parts of the body that turns into lesions or blisters that eventually scab over and fall off. Although the great majority of individuals recover, a small proportion of about 10% may have more severe disease and even a fatal outcome from the virus. At this time, there are no specific treatments, but the smallpox vaccine can be used to control a monkeypox outbreak. Before this year, sporadic cases of monkeypox appeared in the U.S., mostly from travelers returning from Africa.

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Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

And indeed there was a case here in Dallas last year. What is different now is that there have been more than 100 confirmed cases and dozens more are suspected across more than 12 countries, including the U.S. Some of these cases appear to be clusters of people who have not traveled to any areas of Africa and therefore presumably have acquired the disease from transmission within those 12 countries. This

suggests that transmission will continue and cases are likely to occur, even though we're not aware of any to date here in North Texas.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Although an entirely different virus, we can apply a lot of what we've learned from COVID-19. We need to stay vigilant for the signs to allow appropriate isolation, testing, and treatment of any suspected patients. So keep in mind those symptoms that I highlighted and should you experience them or hear of someone experiencing them I would urge you to seek evaluation. Our infectious diseases and infection prevention experts at UT Southwestern in collaboration with public health officials are monitoring the situation closely and we'll keep our front-line clinicians and campus community updated on any further developments.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Another development, just last week, the COVID-19 booster was approved for children ages 5 to 11. If cases remain at the current level, should parents wait to get their children boosted until maybe closer to the start of the school year? What about those over the age of 50?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

A lot in there. The current recommendation is for everyone over the age of 50 or age 12 or older who are moderate to severely immunocompromised to get a second booster dose beginning four months after the first dose. Children 5 to 11 are now eligible, as noted in the question, to receive their first booster starting five months after completion of their initial series. As we head into summer, when travel becomes more routine and as COVID-19 cases appear to be rising again, staying up to date with the recommended boosters is important both to keep yourself and your family safe and along with our UT Southwestern community. Neither prior infection or previous vaccination necessarily guarantees long-lasting immunity against a new infection, especially as new variants and subvariants of the virus emerge.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

While cases have waned since the Omicron surge in the winter months, they are again on the rise, as I shared during my initial comments. We're also learning about lingering symptoms, otherwise known as long COVID, which children can experience as well. The American Academy of Pediatrics urges children and adults to get the COVID-19 vaccine and boosters as soon as they are eligible. Being vaccinated and boosted is especially important with new variants and subvariants of the COVID-19 virus that can spread quickly and infect more children. So we recommend that parents consider these factors and discuss any questions they have with their child's pediatrician. Since I know some of you have toddler-aged children and infants at home, the FDA is expected to meet about both the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines for younger children in the next month.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Thank you for that. Shifting to Facilities Management, we received a question about air quality during the demolition of Old Parkland Hospital and some concerns about asbestos. What is being done to ensure the highest safety for those working in nearby Zale Lipshy Pavilion as well as the James W. Aston Ambulatory Care Center?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

So we, and the “we” here are both our Facilities leadership, our Business Affairs leadership in conjunction with our Health System, are working closely with our partners at Parkland Hospital, including their demolition contractor, to develop a detailed mitigation plan, which will account for vibration noise and dust, and the latter would certainly include any concern about asbestos. Safety, as in all things, remains our top priority, and we are collaborating with Parkland on a preliminary assessment of the site's condition. There will be constant monitoring to ensure occupants and sensitive equipment inside the buildings adjoining Parkland, such as the Aston and Zale Lipshy, are protected at all times. It's important to note that the abatement activities around asbestos will be fully contained within abatement zones inside the building. So none of that will be getting outside the confines of the Old Parkland itself.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Our UT Southwestern Facilities Management team will increase the frequency of inspections and accelerate the changing of filters at the air intakes at all adjoining buildings to maintain air quality standards at the highest level. As has been communicated in our daily Today@UTSW campus messages, Parkland plans to close all pathways through the old hospital by July 10, and plans are well underway to accommodate the disruption that will inevitably present for those who need to move from the UT Southwestern South Campus over to Parkland or over to the Children's Campus.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Speaking of Old Parkland, what can you share about the future of that space?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

As I have heard from Parkland CEO, Dr. Fred Cerise, after the former hospital is leveled, the first new development on that site will be developed to expand administrative support space for Parkland Hospital. What may be done beyond that, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet been settled, but that will be the first redevelopment of that site. This demolition and the construction projects there are part of the continual growth and progress that we see all around us here in the Southwestern Medical District. I should also add that within the development plans for that Old Parkland site will be to provide additional parking.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Very good. Well, with various groups and teams relocating to buildings adjacent to our main campus – I'm talking about Pegasus Park, Trinity Towers, et cetera – due to construction, do you ever envision a time where everyone will be on campus in a UT Southwestern building, or will this be the model moving forward?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, certainly, we spent a lot of time thinking about just this topic as we began to plan for the demolition of the Bass complex. It is envisioned as part of the campus master plan that administrative and support buildings will be built on campus to accommodate operational functions that have been displaced by the demolition of Bass as well as future growth. I should be clear that, that will be several years out because of the inevitable time it will take to redevelop the sites that would allow us to bring back the functions that are now at various sites near to – but not on – the campus. I know that someone raised a related question of whether leasing space in buildings like Pegasus saves the institution money or creates other advantages.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

The benefits of leasing administrative space off campus include freeing up campus real estate for academic and critical growth and expansion as well as some increased efficiencies. And so our master plan as I've said does call for us to eventually construct additional administrative space and support space. But I do expect as we get closer to that time we will reexamine critically what is that right balance between investments in our own facilities and the flexibility that leasing space for a time can create for the institution and as we are seeing with the relocation of the various activities formerly taking place at the Bass complex.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Our next question relates to our institutional reputation. What more can you tell us about UT Southwestern's recent high ranking for humanistic care? What does that mean?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, for those who may not be aware, earlier this month, UT Southwestern ranked among the top 20 health systems in the U.S. by brand recognition and the top 10 brands that have the best people. And this was a survey and research carried out by the American Hospital Association in conjunction with the

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Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

the Society for Healthcare Strategy and Market Development and surveyed more than 28,000 individuals who weighted health systems, brands, and performance in delivering a humanized experience. At the core of UT Southwestern's mission will always be our deep commitment to the highest quality of health care delivered in a compassionate and humanistic and patient-centered way. I imagine most, if not everyone joining me for this update will take the same kind of pride and satisfaction that I do when I see UT Southwestern and the great work of the UT Southwestern community recognized by such a ranking as we take note each year by the *U.S. News & World Report*.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

But I am also sure that nobody comes to the campus each day with that as the goal. The goal is to provide the very best care and care experience that we can to everybody who gives us the privilege of their trust, of course to support and carry out research discoveries that really can impact lives around the world, and to educate and train the next generation of caregivers, physicians, other health care professionals, and scientists. And that's the essence of UT Southwestern. And so I'm very happy to share the pleasant news of these rankings, but I don't want anybody to think that we should look at that as a goal. It's merely a satisfying way of reflecting how well the UT Southwestern community does deliver on that mission.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

I could not agree with that more. Well with the flex work schedule in full effect now, has a resolution been made for shuttle services to and from Trinity Towers and other off-campus locations?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

So we have an active shuttle route in place between the TRE stop on South Campus, Trinity Towers, and the Pegasus complex. Operating hours for that route are 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. We've also partnered with Children's Health to allow UTSW staff to utilize their shuttle that cycles between Trinity Towers and the TRE stop on South Campus. So hopefully between the two shuttle services, that's provided a level of convenience that counterbalances the fact that we are now somewhat more dispersed in our activities.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Well, we have time for one final question. I want to circle back to COVID-19. How has the pandemic changed the way we research?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

So certainly COVID-19 has changed the world of medicine in profound ways, including how we conduct and think about research at UT Southwestern. Just as we have been able to be a leader in clinical care during the pandemic, our research contributions have been, I believe, truly impressive. Dr. Joan Conaway, our Vice President for Basic Research, has let me know that as of the end of this last month, there have been more than 300 distinct research projects, including 55 clinical trials, resulting in more than 500 scientific publications related to COVID-19. There are several aspects of the UT Southwestern research community that positioned us to contribute in such a substantial and meaningful way. First, we have a strong foundation in basic research into the fundamental underpinnings of human biology and disease mechanism. This has been widely recognized, as UT Southwestern is often noted to be one of the most highly cited in terms of scientific publications of all institutions in the world.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

We were also able to pivot to work on key fundamental questions about the SARS-CoV-2 virus responsible for COVID-19 virtually from the outset of the pandemic. And we were also able to really benefit from one of the most distinctive aspects of the research enterprise here at UT Southwestern; it's crosscutting multidisciplinary collaborative approach to a science. And I would say one of the impacts of COVID-19 has been to only reinforce and accelerate that cross-departmental multidisciplinary approach that now will give added momentum to research in many other areas. And that collaboration is not just within the laboratory research community, but across the campus in integrating that laboratory-based research with the clinical environment. Again, it was part of why we could be such a force for advancing clinical trials, clinical research, in a very rapid way.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

The momentum in the COVID-19 research has further reinforced and helped us grow our strengths in clinical research and data and population health sciences. This is a broad applicability and certainly will be a cornerstone of the research which will go on in our new School of Public Health. So I take that as a lasting and important outcome from our experience in turning our scientific attention to COVID-19.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

I'd like to make note of a couple of examples of research that was galvanized that now positions UT Southwestern to contribute in a way new to us since pre-pandemic. And I point to the great work and collaboration between our clinical pathology laboratories and the Eugene McDermott Center For Human Growth and Development, and its Next-Gen Sequencing Core, which has played a still ongoing role in sequencing the viruses of patients infected by COVID-19 to monitor the evolution of variants and sub-variants here in Texas. And so it's an example where the needs that we see because of the pandemic

have led us to think of how to apply our capabilities: intellectual, scientific, and technical for important problems that enhance the public health.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Well, thank you for taking the time to address these many questions this morning.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Thank you, Jenny.

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